

Social death and the loss of a 'world': an anatomy of genocidal harm in Sudan

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Social Death and the Loss of a ‘World’: An Anatomy of Genocidal Harm in Sudan

Abstract

This article explores Claudia Card’s hypothesis that social death is the distinctive harm of genocide. Drawing on original in-depth interviews with individuals from the genocide-affected regions of Darfur and the Nuba Mountains in Sudan (now living in, and interviewed in, the US and the UK), I illustrate the value and validity of the concept of social death as a phenomenological lens for understanding the depth, extent and character of genocide’s harms for its victims and survivors. Aided by the work of a number of authors (including Elias and Jean-Luc Nancy), I outline a relational interpretation of Card’s important scholarship in order to show that understanding the distinctiveness of genocide requires that we also consider, in ontological terms, what it means to be human. I seek to do this in a way that may form the basis of a flexible definitional approach to genocide, and which overcomes oppositions between individualist and collectivist approaches to conceptualising harm. Often falling through the gaps of technical legal discourse and conventional frameworks of understanding, the profound, existential harm of genocide can be challenging to grasp. By centring the concept of social death, this article aims to contribute to our ability to do.

Key words: genocide, social death, Sudan, testimony, phenomenology

The way I feel is that my life has become tasteless¹

I feel I have lost my identity²

You are cut off from your roots, you are uprooted³

They snatch everything out of you. They leave you empty⁴

¹ Interview 1.

² Interview 4.

³ Interview 11.

*Suddenly you find yourself as if you are alone in this world. This is the equivalent to death. You may come to the conclusion that it is better for you to die*⁵

Introduction

Genocide is in public, political, and scholarly discourse perceived as a ‘special form of wrongdoing, a class of moral evil unto itself.’⁶ Yet the reasons why, exactly, genocide has this unique moral status, and is as such deserving of a singular moral opprobrium, are often only superficially interrogated. Whilst there have indeed been thoughtful and important philosophical interventions on the issue by a number of scholars,⁷ dominant and conventional answers to this question remain centred on the view that genocide denotes a unique form of mass killing that is state-directed, ethnically motivated, systematic and pre-meditated. This mass killing, moreover, is deemed genocidal only if it is accompanied and driven by a particularly evil mind set, namely, the perpetrators’ intent to physically destroy the targeted group. Indeed, reliance on the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide has meant that, for many scholars, and of course lawyers and policymakers, ‘intent’ is at the absolute core of what makes genocide distinctive.⁸ Sudan is a case in point; debates about the presence or absence of a specific genocidal intent have been central to broader interpretations of the situation, and the possibility

⁴ Interview 18.

⁵ Interview 23.

⁶ Lee, S., ‘The Moral Distinctiveness of Genocide,’ *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 18(3), 2010, p. 335.

⁷ For example, MacCleod, C. M., ‘An Alternative Approach to the Harm of Genocide,’ *Politics*, 32(3), 2012, pp. 197-206; Abed, M., ‘Clarifying the Concept of Genocide,’ *Metaphilosophy*, 37(3-4), July 2006, pp. 308 – 330; Shuster, M., ‘Genocide and Philosophy’, in Moses, D. and Bloxham D., (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 217-35; Boghossian, P., ‘The Concept of Genocide,’ *Journal of Genocide Research*, 12 (2010), pp. 69-80; Lee, S.P., ‘The Moral Distinctiveness of Genocide’, *Journal of Political Philosophy* 18(3), (2010), pp. 335–356; May, L., *Genocide: A Normative Account* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), and ‘How is humanity harmed by genocide?’ *International Legal Theory*, 11(1), Summer 2005, pp. 1-23; Lang, B., ‘The Evil in Genocide,’ in Roth, K. (ed.), *Genocide and Human Rights: A Philosophical Guide* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Card, C., ‘Genocide and Social Death’, *Hypatia* 18(1), 2003, pp. 63–79, ‘The Paradox of Genocidal Rape aimed at Enforced Pregnancy,’ *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 46 (2008), pp. 176-89, *Confronting Evils: Terrorism, Torture, and Genocide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Fackenheim, E., ‘The Holocaust and Philosophy,’ *Journal of Philosophy*, 82(10), 1985, pp. 505-514.

⁸ The full text of the 1948 Convention is available here: <https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/unts/volume%2078/volume-78-i-1021-english.pdf>.

of an official genocide determination.⁹

However, often implicitly underpinned by narrow and sociologically problematic legalistic paradigms, these debates have tended to overlook alternative, potentially richer approaches to apprehending and understanding genocide, including those that draw on the original conceptualisation of Raphael Lemkin, who emphasised the fundamentally social and cultural nature of genocidal destruction.¹⁰ Indeed, for Lemkin, who coined the term in the 1940s, techniques of genocidal destruction could be: political, social, cultural, economic, biological, physical, religious, and moral.¹¹ Moses aptly captures Lemkin's formulation of genocide as a 'total social practice,' affecting all aspects of group life.¹² Lemkin's broad approach thus contrasts with the skew towards physical destruction evident in the UN Convention. Moreover, whilst it may be the case that, as Jones writes, 'Most scholars and legal theorists agree that intent defines genocide,'¹³ for Powell, the logical conclusion of the focus on intent is that:

The outcome of a course of action matters less than the intent behind it; put another way, the experiences of the victims count for less than the moral quality of the accused perpetrator.¹⁴

This is not to suggest that the issue of intent is unimportant or irrelevant to our broader understanding.¹⁵ However, the focus on intent as the uniquely 'evil' and

⁹ Such a determination was for this reason rejected by a UN commission of inquiry on the situation on Darfur in 2005. See, United Nations, *Report of the International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur to the United Nations Secretary-General*, Geneva, 25 January 2005), available online at: http://www.un.org/news/dh/sudan/com_inq_darfur.pdf.

¹⁰ See Lemkin, R., *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress*, (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1944). Especially chapter IX.

¹¹ Lemkin, *Axis Rule*, pp. 82-90. Martin Crook and Damien Short have recently developed the concept of 'ecologically induced genocide' as an additional 'method' or 'technique' of genocide. See, Martin Crook and Damien Short, 'Marx, Lemkin and the genocide-ecocide nexus,' *International Journal of Human Rights*, 18(3), 2014, pp. 298-319.

¹² Moses, D., 'Empire, Colony, Genocide: Keywords and the Philosophy of History,' in Moses D., (ed), *Empire, Colony, Genocide*, p. 13.

¹³ Adam Jones, *Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction*, 3rd Ed., (Oxon: Routledge, 2017).

¹⁴ Powell, C., *Barbaric Civilisation*, p. 75.

¹⁵ Bill Wringe, for example, argues interestingly that genocide is qualitatively distinct from 'mass murder' due to the form of 'collective action manifesting a collective evil will' that it exhibits. See Wringe, B., 'Collective Action and the Peculiar Evil of Genocide,' *Metaphilosophy*, 37(3-4), July 2006, pp. 376 – 392.

defining feature of genocide arguably (perhaps unintentionally) obscures the perspectives and experiences of victims.

In contrast, here I explore an approach that seeks explicitly to ground our understanding in the lived experiences of genocide's victims and survivors. Drawing on Claudia Card's harm-based concept of 'social death,' and developed through examination of the case of Sudan, it is suggested that such a reorientation provides an illuminating route into important questions about genocide's distinctiveness, and indeed the ethical and analytical value of the concept. The analysis is based on detailed empirical engagement with original victim/survivor testimony from individuals originally from the genocide-affected regions of Darfur and the Nuba Mountains, collected during in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The individuals interviewed were all living in, and interviewed in, the US and the UK.

Developing Card's important scholarship, I outline a relational interpretation of the concept of social death, aided by the work of a number of authors, in order to show that understanding the distinctiveness of genocide requires that we also consider, in ontological terms, what it means to be human. I seek to do this in a way that may form the basis of a flexible definitional approach, and which overcomes oppositions between individualist and collectivist approaches to conceptualising harm, and specifically the harm of social death.

Using the lens of social death draws out with greater salience the depth of the experience of loss and harm associated with genocide. It also helps us explain why and how social and cultural destruction can be genocidal. The profound, existential harm of genocide can be challenging to grasp, and often falls through the gaps of technical legal discourse and conventional frameworks of understanding. As the testimony presented illustrates, centring social death adds a valuable and complementary phenomenological layer of understanding to Raphael Lemkin's broad social and cultural conceptualisation. A renewed focus on such experiential dimensions has potential not only to deepen appreciation of the meaning of genocidal destruction for its victims, but also to contribute to an understanding of why such destruction and the harm it inflicts is distinctive. Doing so may also further understanding of how processes of genocide unfold over time, and how best to support victim/survivor communities in the context of reconstruction efforts in post-genocide situations.

‘Social death’ and the distinctive harm of genocide

Why do we need the specific crime or concept of genocide? What does the term capture above and beyond, for example, mass murder or crimes against humanity? One way authors have approached this question is through examination of the primary ‘object’ that is damaged or harmed by genocide. MacLeod notes that there exists a ‘general consensus’ in the scholarly literature on this issue that genocide should be characterized either in terms of damage done to *individuals*, or damage done to *groups* targeted by genocide.¹⁶ As Steven P. Lee writes:

What or who is the chief *object* of harm when genocide is committed, individuals or the groups to which they belong? Is genocide distinguished by harm to the group itself, with the harm done to its members only a means to the harm to the group (as with collectivist accounts), or is genocide distinguished by the harm done to its individual victims?¹⁷

Aligned with the individualist approach, the question that Card believed to be central in any argument to the effect that genocide is distinctive is this:

Is any ethically distinct harm done to members of the targeted group that would not have been done had they been targeted simply as individuals rather than because of their group membership?¹⁸

Her answer is that there is indeed a harm that is ethically distinct:

What distinguishes genocide is not that it has a different kind of victim, namely, groups (although it is a convenient shorthand to speak of targeting groups). Rather, the kind of harm *suffered by individual victims*, in virtue of their group membership, is not captured by other crimes.¹⁹

¹⁶ MacLeod, ‘The Harm of Genocide,’ p. 197.

¹⁷ Lee, ‘The Moral Distinctiveness,’ pp. 338-9.

¹⁸ Card, ‘Genocide and Social Death,’ p. 73.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 68. Emphasis added.

Card's argument centres on the related concepts of 'social death' and 'social vitality.' Specific to genocide, Card says, is the extreme harm inflicted on its victims' 'social vitality,' severe loss of which can result in 'social death.' Social vitality, according to Card, is constituted through connections and relationships — family and community, contemporary and intergenerational — that 'create the contexts and identities that give meaning and shape to our lives.' The loss of such connections, connections that link an individual to both the past and future, is a 'profound loss.'²⁰ It may amount to a 'loss of identity and consequently a serious loss of meaning for one's existence.'²¹ Card borrows the phrase, social death, from Orlando Patterson, who first described the concept in his book, *Slavery and Social Death*, to describe the condition of slaves. Patterson writes: 'if the slave no longer belonged to a community, if he had no social existence outside of his master, then what was he? The initial response in almost all slaveholding societies was to define the slave as a socially dead person.'²²

Card argues the concept of 'cultural genocide' is redundant and misleading; social death *implies* 'cultural death,' and the separate term erroneously assumes some genocides do not include cultural death.²³ She writes:

The intentional production of social death in a people or community is the central evil of genocide. That is so not only when a genocide is mainly cultural but even when it is homicidal on a massive scale. Social death distinguishes the evil of genocide, morally, from the evils of other mass murders. Even genocidal murder can be understood as an extreme means to the primary goal of social death.²⁴

Card also questions the assumption that social death is less extreme than physical death; a sentiment, it will be seen, also expressed by some of genocide's survivors.

Card's account of social death shifts attention away from perpetrator intentions, individual deaths and mass violence, towards losses of 'relationships, connections, and the foundational institutions' which create community, and through

²⁰ Card, *Confronting Evils*, p. 237.

²¹ Card, 'Genocide and Social Death,' p. 63.

²² Patterson, O., *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, (Harvard, 1982), p. 38.

²³ Card, C., 'Genocide and Social Death,' p. 63. See also Short, D., 'Cultural genocide and indigenous peoples: a sociological approach,' *International Journal of Human Rights*, 2014, 14:6, pp. 833-848.

²⁴ Card, *Confronting Evils*, p. 237.

which individuals form identities and establish meaningful lives, and even meaningful deaths.²⁵ That which is targeted, damaged or destroyed in a genocidal process is not necessarily a population *per se*, but rather the ties, bonds, and relationships — economic, community, cultural, political, religious etc. — that in Card’s terms ‘turn a population into a community or people.’²⁶

But what, more precisely, constitutes a ‘people’? In a valuable development of Card’s work, Abed provides an account of the features that make a group susceptible to the harm of genocidal social death – for not all groups are susceptible.²⁷ According to him, a group can suffer genocide if its members ‘consent to a life in common,’ if its culture is ‘comprehensive,’ and if ‘the social structure of the group is such that membership cannot easily be renounced.’ If these conditions are present, then the ‘flourishing of the group’s culture and social ethos will have profound and far-reaching effects on the well-being of its individual members.’ And as such, systematic destruction of social and cultural institutions will result in individual group members suffering the distinctive harms, deprivations, and suffering ‘peculiar’ to genocide.²⁸

Decentring ‘intent’

Although in the above quotation Card writes of genocide in terms of the ‘intentional production’ of social death, elsewhere she has suggested that the production of social death as a ‘reasonably foreseeable’²⁹ or ‘willingly accepted’³⁰ consequence is sufficient for a genocide classification. Whilst detailed philosophical consideration of genocidal intent and Card’s understanding of it is beyond the scope of this article, a brief discussion will be useful to give a sense of how an understanding of genocide as social death might fit into broader theoretical frameworks. As an initial point, the focus on social death defended in this article implicitly embodies a conceptual privileging the experiences of victims over the mental states, subjectivity and moral quality of individual perpetrators or groups of perpetrators. In this sense, it could be

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Card, C., *Confronting Evils*, p. 278.

²⁷ Not all groups are vulnerable to such harm. As Abed notes, we must be able to explain why the class of people who enjoy karaoke, for example, would not be victims of a genocidal crime if they were targeted.

²⁸ Abed, M., ‘Clarifying the Concept of Genocide,’ *Metaphilosophy*, 37(3-4), July 2006, p. 308.

²⁹ Card, ‘Genocide and Social Death,’ p. 78.

³⁰ Card, *Confronting Evils*, p. 259.

seen as underpinned by a consequentialist logic insofar as it is concerned above all with the distinctive harm experienced by victims. If our sociological concepts are inevitably in significant ways constructions we impose on social reality, how we choose to ‘carve up’ and represent this reality will have important ethical implications, particularly regarding how our attention and focus is directed. In this sense, in addition to a claim about why genocide is a distinctive category of social violence, privileging the harm experienced by victims, rather than expending time and energy determining the presence or not of perpetrators’ specific mental states, is a choice underpinned by certain ethical considerations about what, in situations that are likely to be complex, urgent and fast-moving, is most important. It is a conceptual structuring, in short, that compels us to attend first and foremost to the existential horror of genocide.

Yet a deeper theoretical claim could also be made. Much thinking about genocide remains tied to simplistic and decontextualized conceptions of intent in order to explain its occurrence. This common-sense understanding of intent underpins a more general implicit linear causal model of genocide’s origins and unfolding as a top-down, coordinated and preconceived plan. In other words, as Martin Shaw writes, dominant approaches to genocide tend to assume an ‘*uncomplicated nexus between perpetrator intentions and outcomes.*’ However, it is precisely this assumption that makes conventional approaches so ‘sociologically unconvincing.’³¹ Actor-based definitions centred on perpetrators’ ‘intent,’ while perhaps emotionally satisfying, and unavoidable in a legal context, are ‘not *sufficient* for the explanatory purposes of social science, for which social relations and context are more important.’³² Paradigms that privilege intent tend to neglect the complex ways in which genocidal policies (and intent) evolve and radicalize over time, presenting a distorted picture of genocide’s complex genesis.³³ They are, moreover, unable to conceptually grasp the ways in which genocidal logics may be systemically embedded in broader historical processes and structural contexts. Such logics, in some contexts, arguably embody an agential capacity of their own, constituting and superseding the will or agency of

³¹ Shaw, M. *What is Genocide?* pp. 93-4. Emphasis in original.

³² Shaw, M., ‘From Comparative to International,’ p. 649. Emphasis in original.

³³ See, for example, Browning, C. R., *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939 – March 1942*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004).

consciously ‘intending’ individual human subjects.³⁴

Indeed, important work in genocide studies has contested the view that genocide should be defined as a systematic, state-directed and ‘always *consciously chosen policy*.’³⁵ Tony Barta, for example, has adopted a more structural interpretation using the concept of ‘relations of genocide.’³⁶ In seeking to uncover these ‘relations,’ Barta was guided by the ‘Marxian principle that there are historical realities (impersonal and powerful, though produced by human activities) that influence perceptions, actions and relationships in ways that are independent of individuals’ intentions.’³⁷ Patrick Wolfe has similarly made a compelling case that genocide should be conceptualized as a ‘structure’ exhibiting a ‘logic of elimination,’ rather than an ‘event.’³⁸ And as Damien Short has recently argued in relation to the genocidal consequences of ‘ecocide’ for indigenous communities around the world, genocidal social death can be induced without a ‘specific intent to destroy’ through ecological destruction. Drawing on the work of Wolfe, he further writes that even genocidal mass murder may occur ‘through sporadic and uncoordinated action or as a by-product of an incompatible expansionist economic system.’³⁹

The conceptual privileging of harm suggested here is underpinned, therefore, not only by ethical considerations, but may also form part of a more nuanced socio-ontological approach to framing genocide that can accommodate more complex conceptualizations of intent and distributed forms of agency.⁴⁰ Although these issues

³⁴ See, for example, Cudworth and Hobden, ‘Of Parts and Wholes’ 2013, pp. 438-9, p. 443. On

³⁵ Curthoys and Docker, ‘Defining Genocide,’ p. 28. Emphasis added.

³⁶ Tony Barta, ‘Relations of Genocide: Land and Lives in the Colonisation of Australia,’ in Walliman and Dobkowski (eds.), *Genocide and the Modern Age*, 2nd ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), pp. 237–252.

³⁷ Tony Barta, ‘With intent to deny: on colonial intentions and genocide denial,’ *Journal of Genocide Research*, 10(1), 2008, p. 115.

³⁸ Patrick Wolfe, ‘Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native,’ *Journal of Genocide Research*, 2006, 8(4), pp. 387-409.

³⁹ Damien Short, *Redefining Genocide: Settler Colonialism, Social Death and Ecocide* (London: Zed Books, 2016), p. 161. See also Mark Levene and Daniele Conversi, who argue neoliberal globalization and concomitant processes of nation-state building amount to a ‘structural genocide’ against subsistence societies: ‘Subsistence societies globalisation, climate change and genocide: discourses of vulnerability and resilience,’ *International Journal of Human Rights*, 18(3), 2014, pp. 281-297.

⁴⁰ For a good overview of recent thought around these ideas, see, for example: Michele Acuto and Simon Curtis (eds.), *Reassembling International Theory: Assemblage Thinking and International Relations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014); Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (eds.), *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

are not empirically addressed in this article, the limited aim of this brief discussion is to highlight how the focus on social death might fit into and assist the development of a more holistic theoretical approach to genocide that decenters a simplistic notion of intent.⁴¹

An assault on being: a relational conceptualisation of social death

Returning to Card, a number of potential problems with her account of social death can be identified. For example, as noted, her discussion is centred on social death as a condition experienced by individuals (albeit in virtue of their group membership). Her account, thus, could also be said to represent a state or an outcome for an individual. However, representing social death in this way may limit our ability to identify imminent, or actually occurring genocide until after the fact.⁴² Arguably therefore, Card does not give sufficient attention to social death as a process that develops, unfolds, or takes root over time.

Further, it seems the relationship between social vitality on the one hand, and social death on the other, needs further clarification. If it is social vitality that genocide destroys, and the destruction of a group's social vitality can lead an individual to a condition of social death, arguably this should prompt us to think more deeply about the nature or ontology of the 'self': what is it about individuals such that they are susceptible to the condition of social death following extreme destruction of social vitality, or (as some interviewees in this study described) to the experience life as a kind of 'living death'? Considering these questions, we see Card's reduction to the individual becomes problematic, even on her own terms. Whilst processual and relational elements are indeed present in Card's writings, they could be more fully emphasized and developed.

A relational interpretation of social death, I suggest, facilitates a conceptual move beyond Card's focus on individual harm, without reducing the object of this harm to groups. Indeed, arguably the very possibility of social death as Card describes it presupposes the relational structure and intersubjective constitution of an

⁴¹ For interesting discussions on the issue of intent in relation to genocide see: 'Three Responses to "Can There Be Genocide Without the Intent to Commit Genocide?"' *Journal of Genocide Research*, 10(1), 2008, pp. 111-133; Dirk Moses, 'Conceptual blockages and definitional dilemmas in the "racial century": genocides of indigenous peoples and the Holocaust,' *Patterns of Prejudice*, 36(4), 2002, pp. 7-36.

⁴² Thanks to Martin Shaw for raising this point.

individual's being and identity. Highlighting this helps us see the external, relational and collective 'correlates' of the subjective, individual, experience of genocidal social death, and therefore the potential for an expanded understanding of the concept that bridges the opposition between collective and individual harms. For example, Abed writes:

When a culture imprints itself on almost every area of an individual's life, the individual is influenced in profound and far-reaching ways. Developing as a person in the midst of or in close proximity to such a group means internalizing its narratives, rituals, practices, and norms. This experience does much more than shape the inner life of an individual. Belonging gives a person a sense of security and orientation in an otherwise confusing world; *it sustains the unity and coherence of the self rather than being a mere aspect of it.*⁴³

In a line of argument similar to that proposed here, Lisa Guenther, in her examination of the consequences of solitary confinement, describes a suffering that 'blurs the distinction between life and death.' She asks: 'what must subjectivity be like in order for this to be possible? Who are we, such that we can be unhinged from ourselves by being separated from others?' This notion of 'becoming unhinged,' she writes, is not simply a 'colloquial expression,' but rather a 'precise description of what happens when the articulated joints of our embodied, interrelational subjectivity are broken apart.' In Guenther's view, a 'sense of concrete personhood relies essentially upon embodied relations to other embodied consciousnesses in a *shared world*. [...] *The sense of the world is co-constituted with others.*'⁴⁴ Therefore, Guenther argues, the punishment of solitary confinement 'threatens to undermine the identity of the subject.' The harm inflicted by the practice is 'ontological; it violates the very structure of our relational being.'⁴⁵ Genocidal social death may similarly be described as ontological, as a deep rupture of the relational structure of an individual's being or personhood.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 317. Emphasis added.

⁴⁴ Guenther, L., *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and Its Afterlives*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p. 1, p. 4. Emphasis added.

⁴⁵ Guenther, L., 'The Living Death of Solitary Confinement,' *New York Times*, 26 August 2012.

Powell's discussion of the relational sociology of Norbert Elias – in particular his concept of a 'figuration' – provides a complementary theoretical dimension to these ideas. Elias emphasised that individuals do not exist prior to social relations, and that individual and collective identity depend upon one another. Summarizing, Powell writes, 'Individuals form their personal subjectivity through relations with others in a definite social context, and identification with others is a crucial part of this process. [...] Only in relation to a collective self is it possible for me to be my individual self.' To destroy a collective identity, therefore, 'is to violently destroy a crucial part of the individual self.'⁴⁶ According to Powell therefore, the object that genocide destroys is a 'figuration': a 'dynamic social network that sustains a collective identity.'⁴⁷ Drawing on Elias, he writes:

Our *very subjectivity* is formed out of the practical and taken-for-granted set of skills, attitudes, understandings by which each of us conducts our life, and these develop only through our relationships with each other. The essential human condition is not being, *but being with others*.⁴⁸

This notion of 'being with others' is significant here. For Jean-Luc Nancy, the conditions of 'being-together' amount to what he describes as a 'world.' All beings, he argues, although singular, are also irreducibly plural because they are co-constituted by other beings.⁴⁹ It is therefore insufficient, in his view, to understand genocide simply as an attack on or loss of people *per se*; it is, rather, a destruction of the conditions of being together - 'the putting to death of the [or 'a'] *world*.'⁵⁰ Indeed, Card's characterization of 'social vitality' could be seen as a synonymous description of what Nancy terms a 'world', and Elias a 'figuration' constituting a 'collective social identity.' This notion of the loss of a 'world' can powerfully expand our grasp of the meaning of social death at an experiential level, and help us appreciate the profound sense in which individuals may be left unmoored and dislocated from the world, even when having physically survived genocide.

⁴⁶ Powell, 'What do Genocides Kill?' p. 537.

⁴⁷ Powell, *Barbaric Civilisation*, p. 9.

⁴⁸ Powell, 'What do Genocides Kill?' p. 537. Emphasis added.

⁴⁹ As summarised by Mitchell, A., 'Only human? A worldly approach to security,' *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 45(1), pp. 5-21, p. 7.

⁵⁰ Cited in Mitchell, 'Only human?' p. 7.

It is arguably this very experience that philosopher Jonathan Lear captures so vividly in his discussion of the destruction of the Crow nation in Montana in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He quotes the Crow chief, Plenty Coups, talking about what happened after the nation was confined to a reservation: ‘But when the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. *After this nothing happened.*’⁵¹ Lear interrogates this extraordinary and, as he describes, enigmatic last phrase. We can begin to make sense of what it might mean for a group, in the face of cultural devastation, to experience ‘nothing happening’ if we understand that the Crow have ‘lost the concepts with which they would construct a narrative.’ This loss, in Lear’s view, amounts to the ‘*real loss of a point of view*’; the breaking down of a ‘conceptual world.’⁵² It is a loss that is not a ‘happening’ as such, but rather the ‘breakdown of that in terms of which happenings occur.’⁵³ In articulating this loss, we illuminate also what Lear describes as an ‘*ontological vulnerability* that affects us all insofar as we are human.’⁵⁴

Drawing these ideas together, the core point emphasized here is that social death cannot be reduced to either the individual or the collective level. In recognizing individuals and the ‘worlds’ within which they are embedded as ontologically co-constitutive, we are able to understand the inherent connection between the individual and collective dimensions of the harm of genocide. In short, a relational understanding of the self demonstrates how the destruction of what Card describes as ‘social vitality’ can also amount to destruction of the very possibility of a way of being in the world, and thus also the meaningful possibility of – or the unity and coherence of – personhood itself.

A flexible definitional approach

The harm-based conceptualization outlined here may help provide the basis for a flexible definitional approach to genocide. A flexible approach – one that avoids ideas of there being a universal, timeless form of genocide – is important for a number of reasons. Henry Theriault has cogently argued that because genocide is a shifting social construct, rather than a fixed natural object, we need a flexible approach to

⁵¹ Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 2. Emphasis added.

⁵² Lear, *Radical Hope*, p. 32. Emphasis in original.

⁵³ Lear, *Radical Hope*, p. 38.

⁵⁴ Lear, *Radical Hope*, p. 50. Emphasis in original.

definition in order to adjust to the various ‘mutations’ in forms and methods of genocide, and in order to be sensitive to unique contexts and the changing nature of political violence.⁵⁵ This, one would expect, should also extend to the contingent character of the ideological constructs, justifications and rationalizations constitutive of perpetrators’ genocidal subjectivities. Moreover, Theriault also highlights the problem of ‘anticipatory denial’: ‘as relevant laws, legal interpretation, and political commitments develop, so do would-be perpetrators modify what genocide is in order to avoid political and legal consequences.’⁵⁶

Conceptually centering social death implicitly builds in definitional flexibility, for what it means for a particular group or individual to suffer social death, as well as the means and methods by which it is inflicted, could vary greatly depending on the group and context, the nature of which need not be predetermined. Moreover, Abed’s delineation of the features which make a group susceptible to social death, described above, provides a set of guiding parameters that obviates the need for a fixed list of the types of groups that can be victims of genocide.

Relatedly, the concept of social death may have a particular capacity to function effectively in this way because it could provide a basis for a shift in what Thaler describes as the ‘perceptive and interpretive frameworks’ through which acts of violence are ‘read’ and ‘morally filtered,’ forcing us to grasp the gravity of certain acts and situations in a new light. The inability to recognize new forms of genocidal violence as genocide derives, according to Thaler, from a ‘deficiency in imaginative powers.’ Social death could help engage an empathetic and collective ‘political imagination’ by offering a tangible narrative of human suffering.⁵⁷ It provides a lens through which we may disrupt hegemonic representations of genocide as mass killing, and ‘cultivate, and continue cultivating, the faculty to envisage’ diverse instances violence (such as rape or anthropogenic climate change) and unpredictable methodological ‘innovations’ by perpetrators as ‘subsumable under the rubric of genocide.’⁵⁸ Social death can thus function as a flexible conceptual anchor, potentially providing a degree of protection against ‘anticipatory denial.’

⁵⁵ Theriault, H., ‘Genocidal Mutation and the Challenge of Definition,’ *Metaphilosophy*, 41(4), 2010, pp. 498-501.

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 481.

⁵⁷ Thaler, M., ‘Political Imagination and the Crime of Crimes: Coming to Terms with “Genocide” and “Genocide Blindness,”’ *Contemporary Political Theory*, 13(4), 2014.

⁵⁸ Ibid. Thaler draws on Maria Pia Lara’s work on the role of storytelling in moral learning.

Centring social death in the way that has been suggested here enables us to remain open but grounded; alert to the potential multiple and contingent manifestations and futures of genocide, but attuned above all to that which is surely most important: the consequences for victims.⁵⁹ Focusing precisely on this, the following sections will bring the preceding theoretical discussion to life through the experiences of victims/survivors from the genocide-affected regions of Darfur and the Nuba Mountains in Sudan. The lens of social death, it will be seen, provides a valuable conceptual vocabulary with which to illuminate and make sense of their experiences.

Loss of identity: a social and cultural assault

Whilst horrific accounts of physical violence, torture and killings were frequently recounted by interviewees for this study, it was nevertheless the social, cultural, and identity-based aspects of destruction that tended to be at the centre of their narratives and experiences of loss, pain and harm. In a significant sense, therefore, a focus on the physical alone is unable to capture the depth, range or dimensions of the harm experienced. The majority of interviewees made clear they did not experience (often harrowing) violence targeted at their communities and villages in straightforwardly physical terms; they did not regard it as exclusively an attempt to physically destroy or remove them. Rather, they experienced it, acutely, as an attack on their culture, way of life, their identity, and even their humanity. As one man from Darfur commented, ‘You are not a human being just by eating and drinking. The [genocidal] assault is not just on the body.’⁶⁰

Within the context of two bloody civil wars (1955-1972 and 1983-2005), genocide has unfolded across Sudan’s peripheries over several decades, revealing an historical pattern that has emerged within a shifting social, political, economic, and international context.⁶¹ In southern Sudan, the Nilotic-speaking peoples, including the Dinka, Nuer, Atuot and Shilluk were targeted, particularly from the late 1970s⁶²; in

⁵⁹ In this way, it may be consistent with what Andrew Sayer describes as a ‘moderate essentialism.’ See, Andrew Sayer, ‘Essentialism, social constructionism, and beyond,’ *Sociological Review*, 45(3), 1997, pp. 452-487.

⁶⁰ Interview 8.

⁶¹ For an excellent general historical overview, see: Douglas Johnson, *The Root Causes of Sudan’s Civil Wars: Peace or Truce*, Revised Ed. (Suffolk: James Currey, 2012).

⁶² Helen Fein, ‘Genocide by Attrition 1939-1993: The Warsaw Ghetto, Cambodia and Sudan,’ *Health and Human Rights*, 2(2), pp. 10-45; Human Rights Watch, *Sudan, Oil, and Human*

the Nuba Mountains, especially in the early 1990s, it was the ethnically diverse Nuba peoples, targeted again from 2011⁶³; and in Darfur, the Fur, Zaghawa, and Masalit tribes were attacked, with violence preceding but peaking from 2003.⁶⁴ Similar patterns of destruction have also been perpetrated against the Beja in the east of Sudan. The destruction experienced by these peoples has displayed similar methods and practices of violence, including: the co-option of tribal militias and joint militia-army attacks; man made famine (often enacted through militia looting) and obstruction of humanitarian aid; mass rape and sexual violence; destruction of livelihoods, farmland, poisoning of wells, and looting; the targeting and execution of social, cultural, and political leadership; massive forced displacement; massacres, and ‘scorched earth’ tactics, including the burning and complete destruction of hundreds of villages and cultural symbols. Each of these peoples has also suffered various manifestations and intensities of enforced cultural assimilation and destruction in the form of, sometimes violently enforced, Arabisation and Islamisation, most aggressively in the so-called ‘peace camps’ in the Nuba Mountains in the early 1990s.

When asked generally about the most significant losses and harms experienced, many interviewees spontaneously and explicitly described their experiences in terms of a loss of identity, demonstrating a striking congruence with Card’s interpretation of genocide’s distinctive harm. A woman from Darfur stated clearly: ‘I feel I have lost my identity.’⁶⁵ And a man from the Nuba Mountains commented:

Physical destruction is certainly something that is being pursued with

Rights, (New York, NY: Human Rights Watch, 2003); John Burton, ‘Development and Cultural Genocide in the Sudan,’ in *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 29(3), September 1991.

⁶³ Rahhal, *The Right to be Nuba: The Story of a Sudanese People’s Struggle for Survival* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 2001); Samuel Totten, *Genocide by Attrition: The Nuba Mountains of Sudan* (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2012); Alex de Waal, ‘Not Forgetting the Nuba War,’ *African Arguments*, 9 August 2008. Available at: <http://africanarguments.org/2008/08/09/truth-telling-nuba/>.

⁶⁴ Samuel Totten, ‘Genocide in Darfur, Sudan,’ in Samuel Totten and William Parsons (eds.), *Centuries of Genocide: Essays and Eyewitness Accounts* 4th ed., (New York: Routledge, 2013); Eric Reeves, *A Long Day’s Dying: Critical Moments in the Darfur Genocide* (Toronto: The Key Publishing House, 2007); Human Rights Watch, *Darfur Destroyed: Ethnic Cleaning by Government and Militia Forces in Western Sudan*, (New York, NY: Human Rights Watch, May 2004); Amnesty International, *The Use of Rape as a Weapon of War in Darfur, Sudan* (London: Amnesty International, 2004); John Heffernan and Jennifer Leaning, *Darfur – Assault on Survival: A Call for Security, Justice, and Restitution*, (Cambridge MA: Physicians for Human Rights, 2006).

⁶⁵ Interview 4.

different intensities at different times. But I think, what is being destroyed at heart, [...] when you destroy someone physically, you are not just destroying that person, but you are inflicting a deeper kind of, I would call it, pain, defeat, destruction, that is psychological and extends to the rest of society. It is destruction of the social fabric as well - a way of living, culture. It is destruction of, if you like, the collective spirit of a group. If you are culturally oppressed, and you grew up as a child in this environment, what outlook will you have on yourself? You would have a slave mentality. Looking at yourself, you are ashamed of who you are, and that, I think, is even more sinister.⁶⁶

Echoing the views of many others, this individual perceived genocide as an attack on the 'way of life', 'collective spirit', and 'social fabric of the group.' Attacks were experienced as inflicting not just physical wounds, but also psychological wounds; 'pain', 'defeat', and 'destruction' extended to the whole of society. In the passage above, the physical and the social/cultural appear to bleed into one, undifferentiated assault that has unfolded over time. This theme was a recurring one. A man from Darfur commented: 'They want to destroy your way of life. To erase you, actually.'⁶⁷ Another man from the Nuba Mountains told me that the social fabric and rich culture that once existed in the region 'is gone, it will never be like before.'⁶⁸

As already noted, for Card, a loss of context and identity that provides meaning and shape to an individual's life is at the heart of the experience of social death. When asked more specifically about the relationship between the social/cultural dimensions of the assaults and the physical, violent dimensions, one interviewee responded:

Identity is the origin of the human, the person. They have to know their roots and their culture and language. But physical attack, you can attack and be killed. But if your identity is finished, that means you are nothing, because you don't have an identity, don't know who you are, you don't know which tribe/ancestors. This is what they did, and this is a very sad

⁶⁶ Interview 2.

⁶⁷ Interview 18.

⁶⁸ Interview 16.

thing.⁶⁹

Another man from the Nuba Mountains, when asked a similar question, responded:

I am from the Nuba Mountains. If they attack me, force me to change my name [...] give me a name that does not belong to me. If they change my language. If they change my ways of life. If they take my land. That's like they take my life, my whole life. [I feel a bit] dead anyway. I feel like that. It could be better to die.⁷⁰

These passages draw attention to the ongoing harm of genocide, the effects that continue long after any extreme violent outbursts have subsided, or victims have reached safety. Whilst many individuals interviewed were able to reclaim and 'revitalise' their sense of identity and community connections in the diaspora (further discussed below), many others were not. Several spoke of feeling 'lost' and 'uprooted.'⁷¹ One man from Darfur told me that the biggest loss he had experienced personally was the 'loss of social connection' with the community in his former homeland.⁷² And a man from the Nuba Mountains, living in London, explained:

I just feel like I'm just living. I'm just here, just feel like mechanical. I just feel like the rest of my life is just duties and I'm just like a machine, mechanical. I don't feel it, the type or way of life here. I don't feel the way that your life is, and everywhere, I'm not attached to it psychologically, to anywhere. [...] The way I feel is that my life has become tasteless.⁷³

This person felt this way despite being part of the fairly large and cohesive diaspora community in the UK. Indeed, he was well connected in the community, active in human rights work, and had a professional career in medicine. Despite the large diaspora community, however, he said he was not able to properly practice his

⁶⁹ Interview 9.

⁷⁰ Interview 16.

⁷¹ Interviews: 1, 7, 11, 27.

⁷² Interview 7.

⁷³ Interview 1. A number of other interviewees concurred with the description of life having become 'tasteless.' In particular, Interview 27.

culture, in particular the regular gatherings and festivals so central to his community in the Nuba Mountains: 'I don't feel any kind of enjoyment with any other such life. [...] This is my life, my joy, my everything.' For this individual, any form of 'social vitality' he was able to recover or recreate was severely impoverished compared with what was lost.⁷⁴ A life that is 'tasteless,' as this man candidly put it, is arguably akin to a form of meaninglessness. Major loss of social vitality, Card writes, 'often robs one even of the ability to give meaning to one's life, thereby destroying a fundamental aspect of one's humanity.'⁷⁵

Loss of Language

Importantly related to the experience of identity loss was the theme of language loss, the significance of which came up repeatedly in interviews, and was perceived as being part of a broader assault on communities and their distinctive identities. The genocide, as one individual noted, 'came little by little. First they try to change your language.'⁷⁶ When asked generally to describe what had been some of the most significant losses experienced, both individually and for the community as a whole, many interviewees spoke of how their tribal languages have, over time, been demeaned, attacked, weakened and diminished.⁷⁷ A man from the Nuba Mountains commented that the attack on language was an 'attack on our identity.' Even though the community in the diaspora made efforts to keep it alive with small classes for their children, he feared his language, Kadugli, would soon be lost.⁷⁸

The suppression and degradation of tribal languages was frequently described in terms of an attack on the very foundations of community and the ties that held it together. Many interviewees also talked of how their tribal languages had become synonymous with backwardness. In this context, many referred to the Arabic word *rotana*, a pejorative term used by school teachers (who often came from Khartoum) and broader society in the north to describe African tribal languages. Interviewees understood this term to mean 'animal language.' They were told that their language

⁷⁴ Card, 'Further Explorations,' p. 2.

⁷⁵ Card, 'Further Explorations,' p. 2.

⁷⁶ Interview 5.

⁷⁷ Interview 1; Interview 2; Interview 5; Interview 9; Interview 10; Interview 11; Interview 16; Interview 18; Interview 23.

⁷⁸ Interview 16.

was not a 'real' language, but *rotana*:

They try to destroy all these local, traditional things. [...] If you speak your own [tribal language] the people look down at you. I feel like they are trying to shut me down. This is my tradition. This is the problem of Sudan, it is an identity problem. They don't even let you say the word 'language' to refer to traditional tribal language. They say 'this is not a language, this is *rotana*,' which is like the animal talk. They try to make you feel you are not even human, you are an animal.⁷⁹

Emphasising the centrality of language to culture and identity more generally, many referred to their tribal languages as not simply a means of communication, but as fundamentally connecting them to their tribe or ethnic group.⁸⁰ Some, indeed, described it as the 'carrier' of their distinctive culture, and thus experienced the loss of language as a form of being 'uprooted' and disconnected from their community, traditions, and history. As one woman from Darfur said, 'if you can't speak your language, that means you have no ties to that ethnicity or tribe. You are cut off from your roots, you are uprooted.'⁸¹

Generational loss

Loss of language was also discussed in the context of deep concern about the future, and fears that the interviewees' distinctive cultures would eventually die as future generations would be unable to fully absorb and meaningfully 'live' traditions and languages. Indeed, intersecting with the broader theme of identity loss, the issue of generational loss emerged as a significant theme in its own right. Whilst not initially anticipated when conducting interviews (and as such direct questions about it were not asked), thoughts and fears about generational loss came up spontaneously and frequently. Card sees generational loss as an important element of the overall experience of social death:

When a group with its own cultural identity is destroyed, its survivors lose

⁷⁹ Interview 5.

⁸⁰ Interview 11; Interview 25.

⁸¹ Interview 11.

their cultural heritage and may even lose their intergenerational connections [...] in that event they may become “socially dead” and their descendants “nationally alienated,” *no longer able to pass along and build on the traditions, cultural developments (including languages) and projects of earlier generations.*⁸²

Genocide, she further writes, ‘robs groups of descendants.’⁸³ According to Powell, ‘We may count among the means by which genocide may be committed the measures that interrupt the reproduction of the figuration over time.’⁸⁴ The passing on of culture to children is a fundamental dimension of such a process.

In the context of speaking about her own sense of lost identity, one woman from Darfur, now living in London, commented that she and many others in the diaspora describe their children (often born outside of Sudan) as ‘those who have the lost identity’:

We [worry] about our children, those who have been born here and grown up here. We call them those who have the lost identity. We use this phrase. We lost our identity. We lost our identity. We cannot identify ourselves as normal Sudanese citizens, and now here, we have lost our identity and our children will lose their identity as well. We cannot go back to Sudan, and if we did we have our history destroyed, everything. Everything is finished, everything is destroyed, I can’t take my children back to show them where I grew up, where they are from. Even if there is peace, and there is reconstruction... we need a museum or a memorial. [T]he places have been destroyed, the villages everything has been burned. For me, I feel different, I feel I have lost my identity. But for my children, on top of this loss of identity, they are going to be confused. Who am I? Where do I belong? England? Darfur, the lost area? Sudan?⁸⁵

Many spoke of children’s disconnection from their cultural heritage, and were deeply

⁸² Card, ‘Genocide and Social Death,’ p. 73. Emphasis added.

⁸³ Card, *Confronting Evils*, p. 238.

⁸⁴ Powell, C., ‘What do Genocides Kill?’ p. 539.

⁸⁵ Interview 4.

saddened by the fact that children born outside of Darfur or the Nuba Mountains would struggle with attachment to their traditional culture. Most individuals I spoke to experienced their children's disconnection from their cultural heritage as a significant personal loss.

The issue of generational loss was frequently discussed in the context of the massive (and multiple) forced displacements of targeted communities, and the horrific conditions of the camps they have been forced to live in. It has been over 16 years since the violent outburst of 2003 in Darfur. Many children have now grown up in refugee and IDP camps, and many babies have been born there. Interviewees described the young people in the camps as confused, angry, and increasingly violent and militarized.⁸⁶ Some talked of a 'damaged' or 'lost' generation in the camps.⁸⁷ Several interviewees also talked about the destructive consequences for society as a whole as a result of the situation of younger generations. In particular, many people were deeply worried about the long-term consequences of a pervasive lack of education for the future of their communities.⁸⁸

Also of great concern was the loss of practical knowledge, such as farming. Younger generations, some said, will not know how to maintain the patterns and structures of society, and they would not be able to contribute culturally or economically to its development and advancement into the future.⁸⁹ The younger generations of the camps, one person told me, are 'hopeless,' unable to contribute to society, with no knowledge of their communities' traditions of livelihood. One man from Darfur told me young people in the camps are also increasingly susceptible to becoming involved in crime, alcoholism, and drugs: 'These people are a danger to their families. [...] We have lost a generation.' The poor conditions in the camps, this man continued, are making the 'kids more aggressive.' He also saw these issues in terms of Khartoum's long-term strategy: 'To disconnect a generation from [their] identity is better for the government. They [young people] are alienated from the culture. The government has won.'⁹⁰ Another interviewee commented:

⁸⁶ Interview 10; Interview 23.

⁸⁷ Interview 4; Interview 10; Interview 21.

⁸⁸ All interviewees with whom this issue came up expressed a concern with the lack of education. In particular: Interview 8; Interview 11; Interview 16.

⁸⁹ Interview 11.

⁹⁰ Interview 10.

The social connection we used to have when we grew up is no longer there. And what do you expect from someone growing up in a shanty town? No proper water, sanitation. It is just a box, someone who grew up in a box. He will come out anti-social, he hates everyone, including himself.⁹¹

Another man from Darfur told me that the children who have grown up in the camps 'look like they are from a different continent, like they are from a different world.' These children, he said, 'feel like they don't deserve anything.'⁹² A number of individuals also told me that the government covertly facilitates drugs and alcohol into the camps, with the aim of worsening conditions and morale in the camps.⁹³ I was also told that increasing numbers of girls are becoming involved in prostitution.⁹⁴

Resonating with Patterson's notion of 'natal alienation,' one man from Darfur, speaking of the generation that has known only the camps, said:

If you speak about someone who was born as a result of rape, does not know who her/his parents are, someone who comes from a culture that no one anymore knows anything about [...] When you lose your parents, family, your community, your culture, your way of life, suddenly you find yourself as if you are alone in this world. This is the equivalent to death. You may come to the conclusion that it is better for you to die.⁹⁵

Focusing in on this issue of generational loss, and the camps in particular as sites which facilitate — and at the same time conceal — this process of societal fragmentation, can help us see how the camps themselves, often constructed as safe 'humanitarian' spaces, are implicated in a wider network of destructive processes.

Rape and enforced pregnancy

⁹¹ Interview 18.

⁹² Interview 19.

⁹³ Interview 18; Interview 19.

⁹⁴ Interview 27.

⁹⁵ Interview 23.

Systematic mass rape has been well documented in Darfur and the Nuba Mountains.⁹⁶ Sexual violence and enforced pregnancy have massive physical, psychological and societal impacts, leaving victims 'physically traumatised, shamed, and ostracised.'⁹⁷ In Sudan, pervasive cultural norms mean that women and girls who have been victims of rape are no longer marriageable. They are stigmatised and pushed out of their families and communities, perceived to bring shame on both. Enforced pregnancy has also been an insidious and pervasive aspect of the conflict, with women and girls held captive until abortion was no longer safe.

A large proportion of those interviewed for this study, both men and women, regarded rape and sexual violence as the most harmful and destructive of all the various aspects of the attacks, even more so, many stressed, than killings. Rape, interviewees communicated, fractures, humiliates, dehumanises, traumatises, and demoralises individuals, families, and whole communities.⁹⁸ Indeed, research in 2004 documented that victims of rape in Darfur felt the tactic represented a 'systematic campaign to humiliate the women, their husbands and fathers, and to weaken tribal ethnic lines.'⁹⁹

A significant point communicated by several individuals interviewed for this study was that the issue of rape should not be viewed as an 'add-on,' or something to be considered in addition to the 'main' violence of genocide or the overall conflict. Rather, both men and women saw mass rape and sexual violence not only as the worst thing that has happened to their communities, but also as representative or symbolic of the overall assault - its character, the harm it has produced, its purpose, and the meaning it holds for them as its targets and victims:

Targeting women for rape is one of the most destructive elements for the community I can see. [...] A shortfall of other accounts of genocide is that they don't talk about its impact on women properly, but this is a huge thing. It's just like something that is added on at the end, a sentence. But

⁹⁶ For example: Physicians for Human Rights, *The Use of Rape as Weapon of War*; Amnesty International, *Rape as a Weapon of War*; African Rights, *Facing Genocide*; Rahhal, *The Right to be Nuba*.

⁹⁷ See, Hagan, J., Rymond-Richmond, W., Palloni, A., 'Racial Targeting of Sexual Violence in Darfur,' in *American Journal of Public Health*, 99(8), August 2009, pp. 1386-1392.

⁹⁸ Interview 1, Interview 4; Interview 5; Interview 10; Interview 11; Interview 15; Interview 18; Interview 20; Interview 21; Interview 23.

⁹⁹ Wax, E., 'We Want to Make a Light Baby,' *Washington Post*, 30 June 2004.

women are part of every family, they are fifty percent. We are making a big mistake by being dismissive of a very important part. There is no information about the numbers of rapes, but if we knew the numbers, we could imagine the magnitude of the crisis.¹⁰⁰

Many people have been killed for different issues. [If someone dies] life goes on. Rape is there, it will never leave you. [...] It will destroy you over and over everyday. This is something people can't live with. Many end up committing suicide. They do bad things to other people. It's the destruction of society.¹⁰¹

The concept of 'genocidal rape' has emerged more prominently in an international legal context over the last two decades, particularly in the aftermath of Rwanda and Bosnia. Some argue that rape should be added to the UN Genocide Convention as a separate act.¹⁰² Others believe that it is already included under Article 2 of the Convention, even if not explicitly stated, encompassed under the infliction of serious bodily or mental harm.¹⁰³ The jurisprudence on this issue tends to fall back on the claim that rape, like the other acts enumerated in the UN Convention on Genocide, can 'destroy a group,' and constitutes a genocidal act if the requisite 'intent' is present. But the question of what it means exactly to 'destroy a group' is left unanswered. What makes rape genocidal? Why would aggressors choose to commit rape rather than murdering their victims?

The comments of interviewees suggested that mass rape inflicts multiple harms, consistent with an understanding of genocide as social death. In addition to the common description of mass rape as the most painful and destructive dimension of the overall assault, many also described it as 'worse than death.' It was common for women to state that it was preferable to be killed after having been raped, rather than to live with the consequences. Some spoke of victims begging their aggressors to murder them:

¹⁰⁰ Interview 11.

¹⁰¹ Interview 18.

¹⁰² For example, Sharlach, L., 'Rape as Genocide: Bangladesh, the Former Yugoslavia, and Rwanda,' in *New Political Science* 22(1), 2000, pp. 89–102.

¹⁰³ See Miller, S., 'Moral Injury and Relational Harm: Analyzing Rape in Darfur,' *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 40(4), 2009, pp. 504-523.

People who are dead, there is peace. It [death] is a wartime fact that people can find a way of dealing with even if they have grievances, or want justice. People can find a way of dealing with it. It's not about humiliating someone and letting them live in pain. [...] Rape is the worst that can happen. I may not find the appropriate words to describe it, but it is huge.

The impact of death can generate a positive response, but rape creates a whole situation of damage after damage. You do not just experience one damage. It's the physical harm, psychological harm, and then also the social harm of being disconnected, the harm of rejection [of women and girls raped]. Its consequences affect other people, the husband, family, children, the issue of HIV. And then the whole family is isolated because of the shame. So it will go on and on and on and continue like this until there is a conscious intervention.¹⁰⁴

Such responses, however, particularly the notion that it is better to die than to be raped, should be contextualized in relation to the patriarchal social dynamics and hierarchies that structure communal responses to rape within targeted communities in Sudan. In fact, several interviewees, both men and women, spoke frankly of the aspect of their culture that stigmatizes and ostracizes rape victims as deeply negative and destructive, and something that should be subject to concerted intervention directed particularly at men. Some suggested it was knowledge of this aspect of their culture that motivated mass rapes; consciously exploiting these cultural norms, the perpetrators knew rape would rip communities apart.¹⁰⁵

Nevertheless, in light of the frequency of assertions in the testimony collected to the effect that rape and its consequences are 'worse than death,' we are compelled to take seriously (as Card does) the idea that social death may be worse than physical death, and to ask afresh the question of why genocide, and specifically genocidal rape, can bring about such an experience. Considering the mass rape in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, Card writes:

¹⁰⁴ Interview 11.

¹⁰⁵ Interview 10.

They left many female survivors little more than gestating corpses, social outcasts, unmarriageable, their offspring unassimilable. What had those survivors to look forward to other than life-long post-traumatic stress? Would their fate have been worse had they been killed?¹⁰⁶

Women and girls who have been victims of rape and in some cases made pregnant through rape, may become 'socially dead' insofar as they are deemed to have lost 'value,' or are seen to be 'valueless,' by the broader society. Such women are often rejected from the community, and thus completely dislocated from the unified social context upon which their individual identities depended.

Interviewees furthermore noted that the shame and humiliation associated with rape was not just experienced at an individual level, but was also particularly acute at the level of the community, compounding social fragmentation and widespread demoralization. As Card writes, 'Rape humiliates. Public, unremitting, irreparable, deep humiliation is among the techniques of genocide.'¹⁰⁷ Mass rape in this way can erode community bonds of trust. It also disrupts the processes by which a social collectivity reproduces itself and maintains its social vitality over time by impeding the formation of future families, and traumatizing families that do form.¹⁰⁸

Many interviewees also talked about how, in their societies, women were symbolic of the 'heart' or the 'core' of the community. Thus, to attack and degrade women in this way was also to attack the very foundation or core of the community as a whole. Its humiliating effects, the physical and psychological 'torture' it inflicts, and the way it exerts 'control over the future of communities by tampering with the production of the next generation,' are all ways in which genocidal rape forms part of a broader assault 'that has the clearly foreseeable consequence, if not also the explicit aim, of destroying vitality in a people.'¹⁰⁹ Systematic rape can fragment and demoralize societies to such an extent that they lose the collective will to resist or fight back: 'Vitality destroyed in order to destroy a people's will to fight [...] can also destroy that people.'¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Card, C., 'Further Reflections,' p. 20.

¹⁰⁷ Card, *Confronting Evils*, p. 283.

¹⁰⁸ Card, *Confronting Evils*, p. 283.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

Forced displacement

In terrorizing whole communities into flight, mass rape has been a central factor in the massive displacement of targeted civilians in Sudan. In Darfur, over 2.5 million have been internally displaced.¹¹¹ There are also almost 400,000 Darfuri refugees in eastern Chad.¹¹² In the Nuba Mountains, especially during the 1990s violent displacements forced huge numbers into what were effectively concentration camps (the ‘peace camps’). Since violence broke out in the region again in 2011, hundreds of thousands, facing government attacks, starvation and aerial bombardment, have been displaced from the region.¹¹³ Those living in the diaspora in the UK and US, whilst expressing a deep sense of loss and pain in being pushed from their homeland, nevertheless tended to highlight their relative safety, freedom, and ability to move around and express their culture freely, albeit it in a limited and diminished form. However, this could not be said for those displaced and forced to live in camps; in a very real sense, people in the IDP and refugee camps, as well as the urban slums around Khartoum, simply do not have a ‘place to be.’

Card does not explicitly deal with the particular harms associated with displacement and the loss of land. However, it is consistent with her broader formulation of social death. Particularly for rural, subsistence societies, such as those from Darfur and the Nuba Mountains, land is a vital constitutive dimension of culture and identity. Abed’s notion of a ‘territorially bounded culture’ is relevant and illuminating here. The forced removal of a population with such a culture from their traditional lands, he writes, will almost certainly eventuate in social death.¹¹⁴

Komey discusses this issue using the concept of ‘region,’ which for him describes ‘not a mere geographical space but a societal set-up full of political, ideological, socio-cultural and economic dynamic realities.’¹¹⁵ For indigenous peoples, as Williams and Smith write, ‘region’ is:

¹¹¹ OCHA, Sudan Weekly Humanitarian Bulletin, Issue 09, 23 February — 1 March 2015.

¹¹² UNHCR, ‘2015 UNHCR operations profile — Chad.’

¹¹³ OCHA, South Kordofan & Blue Nile: Population Movements Fact Sheet, 19 May 2014. Available at: <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/South%20Kordofan%20and%20Blue%20Nile%20Population%20Movements%20Fact%20Sheet%20-%2019%20May%202014.pdf>.

¹¹⁴ Abed, ‘Clarifying the Concept of Genocide,’ p. 326.

¹¹⁵ Komey, ‘The denied land rights,’ p. 992.

[A] source of identity and self-sustaining resources; it is an historic territory, a homeland, a rightful possession of one's forefathers through generations. It is distinctive and a unique territory; and the identity of the nation is bound up with memory, and this memory is rooted in a homeland.¹¹⁶

In Sudan, according to Komey, the term 'region' has 'emerged as a self-identifying concept that serves as a focus of cultural, economic, religious, political and historical identities.' Land is not simply a material resource-base, but is 'essentially a *human world* replete with meaning and symbols as an ethnic/tribal identity, social interaction and livelihood.'¹¹⁷ A number of authors have observed that indigenous peoples tend to 'define themselves principally through their relationship to land.'¹¹⁸ Patrick Wolfe writes that for such communities,

[L]and is life — or, at least, land is necessary for life. Thus contests for land can be — indeed, often are — contests for life. [...] So far as Indigenous people are concerned, where they are *is* who they are.¹¹⁹

Indeed, a man from the Nuba Mountains commented:

The land is life, the land is your life. Because we depend on this land. We farm this land, we collect the fire wood from this land. We collect fruit from this land. This is my life in the land. If someone takes your land, he takes your life. If you have lost your land, you have lost everything.¹²⁰

For those displaced from their regions in Darfur and the Nuba Mountains, eking out an existence in the overcrowded and increasingly dysfunctional camps, possibilities for maintaining social bonds, community relationships and cultural practices are severely impoverished. As many interviewees stated, most living in the camps are

¹¹⁶ Cited in Komey, 'The denied land rights,' pp. 992-3.

¹¹⁷ Komey, 'The denied land rights,' p. 993, p. 997. Emphasis added.

¹¹⁸ Short, D., 'Cultural genocide,' p. 836.

¹¹⁹ Cited *ibid.*

¹²⁰ Interview 16.

concerned primarily with survival.¹²¹ This was particularly the case for camps in Darfur and Chad. One woman from Darfur commented that in the camps, 'The unified social context that connects people together does not exist now.'¹²² The camps were described as 'prisons' by several interviewees:

...[there is] no work, nothing to do, no education, just waiting for food. Your self is going to change. This has happened. When [people] leave [they] won't know how to live. They [the camps] are big prisons. This will change your psychology, mentality, attitude.¹²³

Meaningful cultural and social relationships, bonds, and traditions require ongoing practices and activities to keep them 'alive.' But as Card writes, 'genocidal plans prohibit or make impossible' such activities, 'typically in an escalating fashion, until little if any social activity remains.'¹²⁴ Thus we see how the trauma and upheaval of mass displacement, and life confined to insecure and impoverished camps, can function as part of a process of genocidal destruction, rather than 'merely' 'ethnic cleansing.'¹²⁵

Traumatically uprooted from their lands and livelihoods, the inherently interwoven connection between physical space and community identity has been violently disrupted, and the 'intimate social structures' that bound people together, dependent on this connection, have as a consequence been 'obliterated.'¹²⁶ Many interviewees highlighted the loss of culture and disintegration of social connection that has occurred in the camps:

When the culture is on hold for [so long], that culture is lost, because nobody can embrace that culture. When people disappear and move to different places, or live in new cultures, their original culture is on hold. [...] After so long, this culture is lost. People have lost their culture. People have lost their interrelations, have lost their land, have lost relations,

¹²¹ Especially Interview 9; Interview 10; Interview 16; Interview 23; Interview 26.

¹²² Interview 11.

¹²³ Interview 10.

¹²⁴ Card, C., *Confronting Evils*, p. 278.

¹²⁵ See Abed, M., 'Clarifying the Concept,' especially p. 326. For an excellent critical analysis of the concept 'ethnic cleansing' see Shaw, M., *What is Genocide?* pp. 48-62.

¹²⁶ Physicians for Human Rights, *Darfur: Assault on Survival*, p. 7.

family, their friends [...] then what is left to be lost? Nothing.¹²⁷

As a consequence of these losses, the people in the camps in Darfur and Chad were described as simply existing, rather than living.¹²⁸ Another person stated:

When you are displaced you have already lost the culture. You are not able to practice the culture as you want. Especially in the camps. People [are just trying] to get something to eat. All people in the camps can think about is survival. You are not able to think about culture.'¹²⁹

Some spoke about how elderly people are 'lost' in the camps, and suffer particularly badly without the skills to cope with the new environment. Farming was all many knew in terms of maintaining a livelihood, and this practice was central to their identity and connectedness to the community. Forced from their land and traditional patterns of life, they have become passive and dependent.¹³⁰ Further, for the communities in Darfur and the Nuba Mountains, travel to other parts of Sudan and especially outside it, is not customary. People have thus been forced to flee homesteads that have belonged to their families for generations, and the villages and lands they have lived in since they were born, and in which they expected to die.¹³¹ Indeed, Card also sees the experience of social death as involving the deprivation of meaningful deaths.¹³²

Livelihood practices were a linchpin of societal and cultural cohesion. In the Nuba Mountains, for example, most are farmers, and communities work collectively on the land: 'Everybody has obligation to help somebody. The people do together. Any work is done as a group.' Each tribe also has its own area of land.¹³³ A man from the Nuba Mountains, in the context of discussing the issue of livelihood and communities' collective sense of responsibility, also talked about the respect among people. The government, he says, 'tries to break this, [respect] the people's unity':

¹²⁷ Interview 15.

¹²⁸ Interview 23.

¹²⁹ Interview 15.

¹³⁰ Interviews: 8, 11, 23.

¹³¹ Physicians for Human Rights, *Darfur: Assault on Survival*, p. 7.

¹³² Card, *Confronting Evils*, p. 238.

¹³³ Interview 16.

If the people of the Nuba Mountains, all of them are united, and they live in one area in peace, it is difficult [for the government] to change them. That's what they make this war to do. [...] They want to break the people.¹³⁴

Particular features of the local ecology and geography are also deeply embedded in cultural narratives, rituals, and identities. Distinctive patterns of collective social life are arranged around and dependent upon the possibilities provided by the land, including gathering places, cultivation and harvest. Here we see 'culture' and 'nature' as deeply interwoven, making difficult the possibility of a clear conceptual distinction between the two. Massive forced displacement thus involves not just loss of land, but loss of the very 'conditions of being' that made being on earth together what it is for a particular group.¹³⁵

For example, in the Nuba Mountains, a man from the region told me, 'they say, if you don't have a hill, or a mountain as a group, then you don't belong here.' While there are a number of different sub-groups within the Nuba peoples, with different languages, and other variations, 'central to *all* the Nuba groups' is the idea of 'identifying with a mountain or with a hill.' Every Nuba village is beneath a mountain or a hill, and 'from the moment you are born,' he said, you are 'aware of this imposing presence above you [...] each tribe identifies with a different mountain or hill, and often the name of the hill is also the name of the tribe.' Crucially, he continued, the mountains 'are not just looked on as stone, they have spiritual importance,' and from a young age children grow up with 'stories of spiritual forces that dwell in the mountains and caves.' People of the Nuba Mountains have also historically sought safety and refuge inside the caves in times of adversity. The hills therefore are 'central to Nuba identity.'¹³⁶ As Abed writes of communities with a territorially bounded culture:

Landscape can become an important element of myths and a central feature of the traditions and spiritual life of a nation. The stories and legends that add substance to cultural practices often dramatize specific aspects of a group's territory. Prominent landmarks become the narrators of a nation's

¹³⁴ Interview 16.

¹³⁵ Mitchell, 'Lost Worlds.'

¹³⁶ Interview 2.

historical trajectory, and different features of the landscape come to be permeated with meanings.¹³⁷

A woman from Darfur commented: 'People do not deal with land like a resource, but as something they are connected to from their ancestors. This is part of connecting me to who I am.'¹³⁸ Card talks about the ties, bonds, and relationships that connect individuals to their past and their potential futures. Here we can see that these ties extend beyond familial, friendship or community relationships, to deep relationships with the land. To be severed from the relationships they had with this land was experienced as a humiliation: 'Our humiliation, part of it is to take away our land, and make us landless, or like less human that we are not entitled to this land.'¹³⁹

Describing the mass displacements and the dire situation in the camps, one man from Darfur turned directly to the question of what 'genocide' means for him:

For me, genocide is not just like killing an ethnic group. My experience is [...] in genocide you don't even need to kill, but you try to destroy, like displace, and no education, no health, no jobs. You leave them like that. Like, people live in a different country, like in a different world. The genocide is not just killing people. Genocide means killing but not actual killing. Killing people slowly, like you take away their dignity, and their business, education. This in my opinion is genocide.¹⁴⁰

Touching on the issues of 'anticipatory denial' discussed above, he also talked about how, in the context of greater international attention on Khartoum's atrocities, the government has tried to 'find another way' that is not killing, but 'parallel to killing.' The government, in his view, has attempted to 'destroy the people' economically, and by denying education and healthcare. The international community is less responsive to this kind of destruction; they will only pay attention to massacres, he said.¹⁴¹

As a genocidal process goes on, in Card's powerful words, 'the lives of individuals contract, although the population may not. Capacities for interaction

¹³⁷ Abed, 'Clarifying the Concept of Genocide,' pp. 327-8.

¹³⁸ Interview 11.

¹³⁹ Interview 11.

¹⁴⁰ Interview 19.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

atrophy. What remains approaches a living death, at least, social death.’¹⁴² The population in the camps may indeed be expanding, but on multiple levels, the lives of individuals continue to contract. The image of lives ‘contracting’ vividly captured not only the condition of a significant number of people, but also a process of destruction – the destruction of a form of life itself, a way of being in the world. The testimony compels us to see the camps themselves as sites of genocide, contexts within which the possibility of ‘social vitality’ has been eroded. Communities and individuals atrophy. They become isolated, demoralized, fragmented, politically and economically debilitated, and dislocated from the lands, local ecologies, social patterns and cultures with which communal and individual identities are constitutively interwoven. This fragmentation becomes increasingly intractable over time. After a few years in the camps, one man told me, ‘everything about the past is forgotten – their culture, their way of life, livelihood. This is why the social death applies to them.’¹⁴³ There is of course an important resonance here with Hannah Arendt’s assertion that genocide creates not just actual corpses, but also ‘living corpses’ – a space between life and death.¹⁴⁴ Social death could also be read as akin to Agamben’s concept of ‘bare life.’¹⁴⁵

Capturing this type of harm is particularly important in the context of a number of official statements that have been made about Darfur in recent years. For example, Scott Gration, then US Special Envoy to Sudan, claimed in June 2009 that the Sudanese government was no longer carrying out a ‘co-ordinated’ programme of mass murder in Darfur, thus in Totten’s view, ‘inferring that the United States no longer considered the situation in Darfur to be a case of ongoing genocide.’ What we see, Gration said, ‘is the remnants of genocide.’¹⁴⁶ Moreover, in August 2009, the commander of the UNAMID force declared that:

As of today, I would not say there is a war going on in Darfur. [...] What you have is security issues more now. Banditry, localised issues, people trying to resolve issues over water and land at a local level. But real war as

¹⁴² Card, C., *Confronting Evils*, p. 278.

¹⁴³ Interview 23.

¹⁴⁴ See Hannah Arendt, 1973, pp. 447-57.

¹⁴⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, tr. Daniel Heller-Roazen, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

¹⁴⁶ Quoted in Totten, S., ‘Genocide in Darfur, Sudan,’ p. 541.

such, I think we are over that.¹⁴⁷

In contrast, the argument presented here reveals the obfuscation implicit in these statements. The idea that genocide ‘ends’ when coordinated mass killings or physical attacks more generally cease, involves the discursive erasure of a profound and often irreparable harm.

Social ‘Death’? Reconstruction and Revitalisation

But is it the case that such harm is always irreparable? ‘Death’ suggests a permanent ending, an unrecoverable state. To describe victims and survivors of genocide as ‘socially dead’ implies they will never — can never — be socially ‘alive’ again. Thus, we have something of a conceptual binary (dead/alive), which closes off the conceptual and phenomenological terrain between the two. This may be interpreted as insufficiently recognising individuals’ and communities’ potential resilience, evidence of which abounded in the communities engaged with for this study.

However, this would be to misconstrue Card on this issue, for she includes in her account the possibility that identity and social vitality be reclaimed and *revitalised*: ‘Social death has degrees and typically stages. Sometimes social vitality is recoverable or can be recreated in new forms. Often it is not recoverable or the new forms are severely impoverished.’¹⁴⁸ This reflects the diversity of experience described by interviewees. For example, some unequivocally described their experience in terms of a total ‘loss of identity’ and felt the notion of ‘social death’ correctly captured their experience (‘it just speaks to me exactly like what has happened’¹⁴⁹). However, a slightly greater number did not agree with the strength of such a statement, specifically the use of the word ‘death,’ despite acknowledging a deep sense of loss related to their identity. Nevertheless, most made clear that something unrecoverable had indeed been lost, despite their ability to partially reconstruct a sense of identity and community. Moreover, as discussed above, for those in the refugee and IDP camps, despite greater geographical proximity to their homeland, their experience of social death was much more extreme in comparison to those in the diaspora.

¹⁴⁷ Quoted *ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ Card, C., ‘Further Explorations,’ p. 3.

¹⁴⁹ Interview 11.

The community I engaged with in New York in particular is probably somewhat unique within the context of the worldwide Sudanese diaspora community. One interviewee described it as a ‘special’ community:

In New York, the presence of Darfuris is totally different to that in the refugee camps. Most people in New York are educated, at least to BA level, some MA, and some are physicians. Also, most people know at least some other people here before they come to us, or they came from the same area or town [in Darfur]. The majority of us are from North Darfur, the majority from El Fasher area or surrounding towns and villages. So people here have the same social [and] cultural background. Most want to mobilise and raise awareness, to try to educate their community. That’s why the community here is special. Everybody is working very hard to help back in Darfur. So people in Darfur have been able to continue the same culture they had in Darfur. People support each other socially, financially, psychologically. People will come to visit you, we gather together, if something bad happened back at home [...] people become like your parents, they will share the cost of your wedding.¹⁵⁰

Many also talked about how they had been able to retain a sense of connection to their identity and cultural heritage. Some from the Nuba Mountains, for example, described how on arrival in the USA or the UK, they changed their names back to their original Nuba names, discarding the Arabic ones they had been forced to adopt.¹⁵¹ In fact, some felt that the conflict, the attack on their community, and their role as a voice outside the country for those they had left behind in Sudan had led to a stronger, prouder sense of collective identity:

Here, [in New York] we are able to speak our language, Zaghawa. Darfuri children who [are still in Sudan], will lose their language, as they are only able to speak Arabic. We stick together, and we try to keep these things alive, [such as] language [...]. We have many activities here for the Muslim holidays, Eid. We try to do the same as we would back home. We

¹⁵⁰ Interview 23.

¹⁵¹ Interview 16.

come together to pray, we have food, people sing our traditional songs, and we talk together about what is going on back in Darfur, and how we can help the traditions survive, how we save the traditions.¹⁵²

Many also mentioned their use of technology and social media, and how these facilitated their ability to keep their sense of community and connection to home alive. Some, for example, would show their children YouTube videos of traditional ceremonial dance, and used the Internet to teach them their tribal language. I was told of 'Nuba days,' festivals, and weekly Skype meetings many in the international diaspora hold in order to discuss the situation in Sudan.¹⁵³ Clearly these communities have been able, in Card's terms, to revitalize their collective identities, at least to some degree.

Although Card does not flesh out what such a process of 'revitalization' means or entails, the relational interpretation of social death put forward above potentially provides some starting points for deeper theoretical and practical understanding. Any meaningful process of reconstruction arguably cannot be an identical reproduction of institutions and practices. Rather, as Powell writes, it would be more accurate to describe such a process as a 're-growth of the network of practical relations that sustain collective identification.' This would crucially involve a 'restoration of the process of change and transformation' so integral to the 'vitality and coherence' of groups (understood, on Elias's terms, as 'figurations'). Moreover, according to Powell, 'Given enough space and time for successful healing, even the trauma of genocide might be retroactively integrated into that transformational process.'¹⁵⁴ But what, in the face of cultural devastation and deep collective trauma, does this mean, particularly if it constitutes an attempt to in some way reconstruct a now-impossible way of life? How does such a 're-growth' maintain continuity, consistency and connection with the past?

In his book, *Radical Hope*, Jonathan Lear argues it is the avoidance of despair that enables a community to respond to the collapse of a way of life. Crucially, for Lear, the avoidance of despair is possible only in the presence of a hope that is 'directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand

¹⁵² Interview 5.

¹⁵³ Interview 16.

¹⁵⁴ Powell, 'What do Genocides Kill?' p. 544.

what it is.’ Such a hope is ‘radical’: ‘Radical hope anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it.’¹⁵⁵ Radical hope is possible, however, only if it is rooted in the group’s own resources, culture and traditions; amidst great uncertainty, new meanings and possibilities must be drawn from old concepts, definitions and ideas that on their own, no longer make sense. This amounts to a creative renewal that can transcend cultural collapse, and open up new pathways for the continuation of a cohesive collectivity, albeit in a form that is not known or determined in advance.

Whilst such a hope may indeed have underpinned processes of cultural reconstruction in the Darfuri and Nuba Mountains diaspora communities, many interviewees nevertheless communicated they were unable to feel the same bonds of community attachment, or experience the natural sense of identification to the wider society and surroundings that they had previously in Sudan. The majority made clear they longed to return to home. Many also expressed uncertainty about the future, and it remains to be seen whether the processes of re-growth and revitalization described can be sustained into the future.

Moreover, it seems the emergence of radical hope, and in particular the possibility that it could be concretely acted upon or manifested, is not entirely context-independent, even though it may itself be the product of significant upheaval. Arguably, certain very basic conditions must be met, such as relative physical safety, sustenance, and the (even if rudimentary) means and resources (broadly conceived) for building new patterns of collective life. However, for those in the refugee and IDP camps in and around Sudan, these conditions simply do not exist. Nevertheless, Lear’s concept of radical hope arguably illuminates a crucial dimension of Card’s (insufficiently theorized) notion of ‘revitalization,’ offering valuable insights to those seeking to build or support such a process. The concrete means by which such a hope may spark or galvanize broader process of reconstruction should be a central empirical and theoretical concern of genocide studies.

Conclusion

The aim of this article has not been to reduce genocide’s distinctiveness or the harm it causes to social death, or indeed to preclude the possibility (indeed likelihood) that

¹⁵⁵ Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2006).

genocide involves layered and multiple forms of harm that intersect and overlap in complex ways. For example, compatible with (but with a different emphasis from) the approach explored here, Lemkin himself viewed genocide as damaging to humanity and ‘world culture as a whole’ based on its destruction of culture and the associated loss of ‘future contributions to the world.’¹⁵⁶ And as Benhabib has explored, Arendt developed a similar ‘philosophical condemnation’ of genocide as the destruction of ‘human plurality,’ based on which she argued it was a ‘crime against the human condition as such.’¹⁵⁷ Damien Short has recently made an interesting contribution to this perspective, arguing that globalized capitalist expansion and its inevitable environmental destructions threaten the genocidal eradication of cultural difference, in the process undermining the very possibility of continued human existence on the planet due to culture’s function as humanity’s primary adaptive mechanism.¹⁵⁸

Still, by grounding us in the experiences of victims and survivors, centering the phenomenological concept of social death in how we think and talk about genocide in various forums may have significant implications, not only for how the harm of genocide is grasped, but also for how we perceive and act on incipient or unfolding situations, how genocidal practices and contexts are recognized and defined, and how prevention, intervention and post-genocide reconstruction and healing are conceived. As was suggested, the lens of social death has potential to reshape what Thaler describes as the ‘perceptive and interpretive frameworks’ around genocide by foregrounding a tangible narrative of human suffering that engages empathetic ‘political imagination.’¹⁵⁹ It was also suggested that focusing on the harm of genocide, rather than myopically attending to perpetrator intentions and subjectivity, may facilitate an openness to diverse and novel manifestations genocidal processes and methods, thereby potentially helping to combat various forms of anticipatory denial and ‘genocide blindness.’¹⁶⁰ Attention to the distinctive harms of

¹⁵⁶ See Lemkin, R., 1933, and 1947, p. 147. See MacLeod for a defence of Lemkin’s argument that the morally distinctive feature of genocide is the ‘damage done to humankind’ by ‘robbing it of a contributing culture.’ MacLeod, ‘The Harm of Genocide,’ p. 198.

¹⁵⁷ Benhabib, S., ‘International Law and Human Plurality in the Shadow of Totalitarianism: Hannah Arendt and Raphael Lemkin,’ *Constellations*, 16(2), 2009, p. 323. See also Stone, D., ‘Defending the plural: Hannah Arendt and genocide studies,’ *New Formations*, 71(4), 2011, pp. 46 – 57.

¹⁵⁸ Short, D., *Redefining Genocide: Settler Colonialism, Social Death and Ecocide* (London: Zed Books, 2016).

¹⁵⁹ Thaler, ‘Political Imagination and the Crime of Crimes.’

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

genocide, moreover, may reveal much to us about ourselves by shedding light on the ‘ontological vulnerabilities,’ as Lear puts it, of the human condition more generally.

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the concrete implications of such a conception for the meaning and practice of any form of ‘anti-genocide’ action. The more modest aim here has been to demonstrate the value and validity of the lens social death for capturing the experiences of genocide’s victims and survivors, and for providing a (flexible) conceptual anchor that can support our ability to make sense of – and keep our focus attuned to – the depth, extent, and existential nature of (at least one of) genocide’s distinctive harms. If the norms and practices of our responses to genocide are to be ethically sufficient, they must be based on a conception of genocide that recognizes these harms. It is hoped this article contributes towards the general reorientation required for this to be possible.